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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ALGIERS 000617

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KISL](#) [KDEM](#) [AG](#)

SUBJECT: CONTAINING POLITICAL ISLAM: MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD  
LEADER HANGS ON

REF: A. ALGIERS 509

[1](#)B. 07 ALGIERS 1237

Classified By: Ambassador Robert S. Ford; reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: As its tumultuous three-day party congress drew to a close at the end of April, the (Muslim Brotherhood) Movement for a Society of Peace (MSP), one of the three parties in the ruling coalition, re-elected Bouguerra Soltani as its leader after a power struggle between Soltani and his rival, Abdulmajid Menasra. Menasra was widely perceived to have greater popular support among the party faithful, while Soltani had been criticized for sacrificing party independence and core values by making too many concessions to the Bouteflika-led government. Soltani is the preferred candidate for a ruling elite determined to keep the MSP in line -- and in second-tier slots in the government coalition.

His victory over the more popular Menasra represents a victory for the ruling elite, although it came at a price: Soltani agreed to resign his post as Minister of State without portfolio and focus exclusively on leading the party.

Soltani also paid a price in personal pride, apologizing profusely to the party faithful during the opening of the congress for his "errors in leadership" and vowing to do better. END SUMMARY.

WHAT A SOLTANI VICTORY MEANS

[1](#)2. (C) Soltani's victory keeps the MSP in the coalition, in line with President Bouteflika's agenda, and under control, neutralized from pursuing a more aggressive and independent agenda. As Abdellah Messaoudi, MSP member and head of the East Algiers section of the Muslim Scouts, told us on May 21, the differences between Menasra and Soltani were differences of principle and leadership style. According to Messaoudi, Menasra, along with a majority of the MSP base, had come to believe that the MSP had lost its edge, and needed to be -- at a minimum -- more confrontational in ensuring that the government took action on issues such as the harraga and economic reform to create jobs. Messaoudi explained that a majority within the MSP had become disillusioned with Soltani's willingness to sacrifice "core Muslim values" in favor of a "leadership by portfolio," accepting Bouteflika's political agenda in exchange for a share of government ministries. Menasra and his supporters wanted a more defiant, vocal and principled version of political Islam, while Soltani preferred to work within the constraints of the system -- a system he was adept at managing, as a longtime minister and Bouteflika ally.

13. (C) Messaoudi went on to say that the less charismatic Menasra had come to be perceived as a more conservative Islamist force, intending to steer the MSP back to the basic principles of political Islam espoused by late MSP leader Mahfoud Nahnah in the 1990s. Messaoudi conceded that some members of Bouteflika's government were concerned about this trend and wanted to maintain the MSP status quo. Ultimately, however, Soltani's Islamist credentials as a graduate in Shari'a law carried a great deal of weight among the party faithful. According to Messaoudi, the combination of Soltani's greater charisma and the acquiescence of the regime through influencing the MSP's consultative Majlis Achoura set the stage for a Soltani victory despite the disillusioned base.

#### A DELAYED AND CHAOTIC CONGRESS

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14. (C) On April 29 at an indoor sports arena in Algiers, the MSP party congress began at 1630 -- three hours late. Foreign diplomats, including many from Arab countries, told us they had never seen such a delay at any similar event in Algeria, and most left in frustration as journalists present began writing stories panning the congress and the MSP's inability to hide its internal power struggle from the public. At the scheduled starting time the arena was largely empty, save for a smattering of party members carrying signs indicating where regional delegations were to be seated. For weeks leading up to the congress, the Algerian press featured prominent stories on the struggle between Soltani and Menasra, with many portraying the incumbent as embattled and

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the challenger as a rising force. As an indication of Menasra's support among the party rank-and-file, several weeks before the congress a retreat was organized in Blida by the family of Cheikh Nahnah, who died in 2003. Menasra was featured as honored guest, while Soltani did not even attend.

#### FIGHTING OVER ACCESS BADGES

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15. (C) While we were waiting for the congress to begin, several MSP members, from both the Menasra and Soltani camps, told us what was responsible for the delay. The congress organizing committee had been elected directly by the party members, and was controlled by Menasra. That committee controlled the issuance of access badges, which are normally given on a priority basis to voting delegates selected before the congress by wilaya (provincial) party leaders. Soltani's central party leadership controls the wilayas and, by extension, the voting delegates. The organizing committee tried to break Soltani's grip on the party by handing out badges to "populist" party members instead of the officially selected delegates. Soltani loyalists, the delegates were expected to produce a predictable vote outcome, and an impasse resulted when Soltani was informed that they were being blocked. The MSP leadership struggled for hours over the list of badge holders, allowing a mere trickle of party members access to the arena. Finally, the official voting delegates were seated and the congress began, three hours late.

#### CONCESSIONS, DEALS AND SIGNS

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16. (C) Over the next three days, Menasra was ultimately forced to withdraw his name from consideration and Soltani was re-anointed as party leader. Ahmed Issaad, head of MSP's parliamentary bloc, told us on May 12 that Soltani was forced in return to make some conciliatory gestures to the party majority who supported Menasra. According to Issaad, the Menasra supporters demanded that Soltani resign his personal post as Minister of State without portfolio, believing him to be too close to the Bouteflika-led ruling elite. Soltani's

departure from the government would occur over the next few months, according to Issaad, but would not affect MSP's status as a member of the government coalition. He also confirmed that Menasra would remain one of the MSP's top leadership figures, and his loss in the leadership struggle "did not mean in any way that he lost his political clout within the party's Majlis Echoura" (ruling council).

¶7. (C) In an unusual display of contrition, Soltani apologized during his opening address to the congress, saying he had made "numerous errors in leadership" but that these were based on "pure intentions." He also apologized to the audience for the delay in opening the congress, and was harshly critical of the status quo, a stance one MSP delegate told us was designed to appease the Menasra supporters. Soltani stated that "Non-Aligned Movement and Cold War ideas" would not lead Algeria forward, and that the country needed to change from a "village mentality to a screen mentality."

¶8. (C) The surprise appearance of Ahmed Ouyahia (ref A), leader of the coalition partner National Democratic Rally (RND), served as an olive branch between two politicians whose relationship has not always been warm. Ouyahia's speech, in which he referred to Soltani as "my dear brother," was interpreted by several journalists we spoke to at the congress as a blessing from the Algerian leadership (the "Pouvoir") and a sign that the ruling coalition was in good health -- as long as the MSP remained in Soltani's hands. Ouyahia highlighted his support for moderate Islam, thanking the MSP for its "positive presence in the 1990s" and referring to "the MSP of Cheikh Nahnah" as a "school of democracy." He also praised the memory of Mohamed Bouslimani, a founding MSP member who was found buried with his throat slit in 1994, a killing believed at the time to be the work of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA).

COMMENT: TRIUMPH OF THE SYSTEM

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¶9. (C) The MSP's relationship to the Bouteflika-led ruling elite is a symbiotic one: Bouteflika and his entourage need the MSP's Islamist credentials to boost their credibility with elements of the Islamist electorate, and the MSP needs Bouteflika's people to access secondary levers of power and to avoid being marginalized by a regime adept at dividing and conquering political Islam (ref B). It is notable that MSP receives only less sensitive ministerial posts, for example. The MSP can have Commerce or Small Business, but not National Education or Higher Education and certainly not Justice or a security-related ministerial post. The MSP base knows this, and Soltani had to make concessions to a party base that believed him to be too blatantly in bed with the Bouteflika team. Menasra's support grew out of a disillusionment with the party's perceived lack of independence and softened core values. By resigning his ministerial post (which significantly has no actual portfolio), apologizing for past wrongs and adopting a more critical approach to the government (at least during the congress), Soltani maintained his grip on the MSP. In the end the Bouteflika team won, as their man remained in power and the MSP itself remained a tamed -- and probably weakened -- ally.

FORD